

HENRY VIII

The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace

Credit where credit is due - the vast bulk of the text in these notes comes from files downloaded from the History Department pages of the Feltonfleet School website. The Masked Historian may have made the odd change here and there.

What Caused Henry VIII to Order the Dissolution (closing down) of the Monasteries?

- Henry VIII had **fallen out** with the **Pope** over his **divorce** with Catherine of Aragon. Henry felt let down by the Pope.
- The monasteries were a stronghold of the Pope's power in England
- Monks and Nuns recognised the Pope as the head of the Church in England. **Henry would not tolerate this.**
- The early monasteries had provided hospitals, charity, shelter and education amongst many other things. The wealth they had collected had led to **laziness and greediness** amongst many monks.
- Also there were rumours that nuns and monks were not following their vows of chastity (not having sexual relationships). These developments had resulted in a drop in the popularity of monasteries.
- The Church owned up to 30% of the land in England, and the monasteries took much of this up. They were **enormously wealthy**, and Henry believed he could put their wealth to better use.
- By the mid 1530s, Henry VIII had spent most of the vast fortune left to him by his father. He had become involved in wars abroad (with little real success) and he had a lavish lifestyle that was designed to show his power. By breaking away from Rome, Henry became the enemy of Spain and France (and the rest of catholic Europe). He needed money to maintain his lifestyle and prepare England for potential wars (against France in particular).
- **Thomas Cromwell** had different motives. He was an **Protestant and disliked monasteries.**

How did Henry go about the Dissolution?

Establishing the Facts... or Finding the Excuses?

- Early in 1535, **Thomas Cromwell was appointed Vicar-General.**
- Cromwell immediately ordered a survey to establish how wealthy the monasteries were.
- These results were compiled in July 1535 and a book called the "Valor Ecclesiasticus ('**Value of Church Property**') was published. The

monasteries were valued at £100,000 a year from land and £25,000 from other means.

- Later in the year, Commissioners (inspectors) visited the monasteries to investigate the rumours about idleness, greed and bad behaviour.
- They reported back that the monasteries were 'idle, corrupt and useless'.
- There were allegations of monks fathering children and of monks getting married.
- Henry and Cromwell now had the evidence they needed to act. Some did however report back that 'religion is well kept and observed'.
- Cromwell had favourable reports re-written to place more emphasis on faults.

Dissolution of The Smaller Monasteries, 1536.

- In 1536, Parliament passed an Act that permitted the dissolution of all monasteries that had an income of less than £200 a year.
- **376 monasteries were closed.**
- 2000 monks were pensioned off or sent to larger monasteries or nunneries.
- Henry and Cromwell were very cautious and calculating. They deliberately chose the smaller monasteries first in order to test public opinion and because they felt that the Tudor treasury was not yet ready to cope with the larger amounts of money that would come from the larger monasteries.
- There were few complaints and the closures passed relatively peacefully.

However... not everyone was happy to see the monasteries go. Henry faced a rebellion sparked by the closure of the smaller monasteries. **This was called the Pilgrimage of Grace.**

The Pilgrimage of Grace, 1536.

- In the **south and east** of England **little opposition** was seen against the dissolutions.
- However in the **north** things were **different**.
- Two rebellions broke out, one in **Lincolnshire** and one in **Yorkshire**.
- The rebellion in Lincolnshire was easily dealt with, because it lacked leaders of any quality. **50 rebels were executed.**
- However, the **Yorkshire rebels** were a different matter. **Robert Aske**, a lawyer and landowner managed to get together an **army of 30,000**.
- They adopted a **banner** showing the **five wounds of Christ**.
- He referred to his followers as **pilgrims and not rebels**.

- Priests and monks joined the rebellion. They were doing God's work.
- Aske wanted no killing or stealing.
- By October 24th, Aske and his army had **captured York**, and were joined by the Archbishop of York, and Thomas Darcy, a powerful local Baron.

The Pilgrimage of Grace made the following demands:

1. The **return of the Pope's power** in England.
2. The **removal of Cromwell** from power.
3. The immediate **stop to the dissolution of the monasteries**.
4. **Parliament** was to be called to discuss **new laws** and to look into poverty in the north of England.
5. Princess **Mary Tudor** to be renamed as **heir** to the throne.
6. The punishment of those Commissioners responsible for writing bad reports on the monasteries.

- **Henry** had an army of only **8000 in the north** and this was not large enough to deal with the rebellion.
- He had to stall Aske and play for time.
- He sent Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk to discuss terms with Aske.
- He agreed to all the demands that Aske made saying that nobody who took part in the rebellion would be punished.
- A few days later, Henry met Aske, and even gave him a gold chain as a sign of friendship and said that Aske could have everything he wanted so long as the Aske's followers went back to their homes.
- In truth, Henry had **no intention of keeping his side of the bargain**, despite the faith which Aske had put in Henry's word.
- Aske dismissed his army, and then Henry acted by sending his army into Yorkshire.
- **Aske was captured** and held in prison for 6 months. He was then dragged through the streets of York and then left to hang from a tree, loaded with heavy chains. He took three days to die.
- Henry ordered that one man should be hanged from every village that had taken part or supported the rebellion.
- Over 200 rebels including some monks were hanged.
- The other leaders were also executed.
- The **pilgrimage achieved nothing** and received no support from other parts of the country.

What were the consequences of the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace?

- It sealed the fate of the monasteries in England.
- The involvement of monks in the rebellion gave Henry and Cromwell further ammunition and excuses for their continued programme of dissolutions.
- A 'Council of the North' was set up to rule the north of England.
- No more rebellions took place in Henry's reign. He had dealt with the Pilgrimage of Grace with cunning, deceit and great brutality. The 200 executions were a warning to those that challenged Henry's authority.

The Dissolution of The Larger Monasteries, 1539.

- in 1539, Cromwell and Henry ordered the closure of **645 larger monasteries**.
- The Abbots of Woburn, Glastonbury, Colchester and Reading all attempted to resist the closures. A mistake! All of them were hanged at the gates of their monasteries in order to teach a lesson to other would be troublemakers.
- The Abbot of Glastonbury was dragged through the town, hanged, beheaded and his head impaled on his abbey gates.
- The buildings on monasteries were stripped of doors, lead, timber, glass, art and literature, gold plate, silver, gold and jewellery. Livestock was seized.
- Land was sold to the wealthy who fell over themselves to buy it up. The buildings were bought by the wealthy who turned some into fine country houses. If buildings were not sold, they were used as quarries where individual stones were sold off to local builders.
- Thomas Cromwell was a ruthless man and the plans were carried out in a very efficient, if bullying manner.

What Effect Did The Dissolutions have in England?

- Henry VIII now had an **enormous amount of additional money**. The Dissolutions provided him in an EXTRA £140,000 a year between 1536 and 1547. Henry's normal income was £100,000 a year.
- Much of this money went towards the construction of Henry's Royal Navy and the building of new fortifications on the south coast and the casting of new cannons for ships and forts.
- Henry gained an **enormous amount of land**. However, he needed money urgently to fund the war with France and Scotland. Therefore he sold the

land to over 40,000 people including nobles, merchants and self-made men.

- Henry squandered the money on futile, fairly unsuccessful wars.
- If he had held on to the land it would have provided him with a larger amount of money over many years.
- Henry had, by accident, created a group of landowners who would always be opposed to the return of the Catholic faith. They would be unwilling to give up the monastery land they had bought.
- **7000 monks were pensioned off.** Even in 1551, this pension scheme was costing the treasury £44,000 a year.
- Most monks were treated well.
- **Abbots lost their seats in Parliament.**
- Some monks went to work in local parish churches.
- Other monks wandered around the country as vagabonds.
- Many of the people employed by monasteries found themselves without jobs and they too became vagabonds. **Unemployment and poverty increased.** This was worse in the north of England (where the Pilgrimage of Grace had started).
- The closure of the monasteries resulted in a reduction of hospitals, schools, places of accommodation, and care for the poor.
- In some places where the monastery was the centre of life, the **community collapsed.**
- **Sheep farming** increased, producing enormous profits for landowners.
- Sheep farming requires fewer workers and therefore this situation also added to the unemployment problem.
- The dissolutions resulted in the **loss of works of art and literature** that were destroyed.
- Beautiful **buildings were left ransacked and left** to scar the countryside for centuries.
- The last strongholds of the power of the Pope were destroyed. Henry now had complete control over the Church in England.